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# The Unassertability of Contextualism

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## 1. Introduction

There are many versions of epistemological contextualism. They all share the idea that the truth-conditions of knowledge sentences depend on the conversational context of the attributor of knowledge. But they differ in *what shifts with context* and *how the shift operates*. On Keith DeRose's version of epistemological contextualism, what shifts with the conversational context of the attributor of knowledge is how strong an epistemic position a subject must be in to satisfy "knows" (where a subject's strength of epistemic position is determined by how far out into logical space she can track the truth), and how the shift operates is dictated by the "Rule of Sensitivity." DeRose originally defended his version of contextualism by arguing that it provides a convincing answer to the problem of radical skepticism and, furthermore, reconciles seemingly conflicting intuitions about certain puzzle cases. He has subsequently added a third argument for contextualism: it is powerfully motivated by the knowledge account of assertion.<sup>1</sup>

In what follows, we argue that the contextualist, in basing contextualism on the knowledge account of assertion, violates the knowledge account of assertion whenever she asserts contextualism in the context in which it is most natural to do so: that of a philosophical debate.<sup>2</sup> This essay is structured as

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<sup>1</sup> Keith DeRose, "Assertion, Knowledge, and Context," *Philosophical Review* 111, no. 2 (2002): 167–205.

<sup>2</sup> In this essay, "contextualism" will refer to DeRose-style contextualism as developed in Keith DeRose, "Contextualism and Knowledge Attributions," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 52, no. 4 (1992): 913–29; "Solving the Skeptical Problem," *Philosophical Review* 104, no. 1 (1995): 1–52; "Contextualism: An Explanation and Defense," in *The Blackwell Guide to Epistemology*, ed. John Greco and Ernest Sosa (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1999), 187–205; "Now You Know It Now You Don't," in *Proceedings of the Twentieth World Congress of Philosophy Vol. V, Epistemology* (Bowling

follows. In §§2–3, we clarify contextualism, the knowledge account of assertion, and the relation between them. In §4, we present the argument against the assertability of contextualism in the context of philosophy. In §§5–6, we consider four objections to our argument and find them wanting. In our argument against the assertability of contextualism in the context of philosophy, the notion of sensitivity—central to DeRose’s contextualism—plays a crucial role. We conclude in §7, however, by considering a modified version of our argument that is phrased not in terms of sensitivity but in terms of another key DeRosean notion: strength of epistemic position.

## 2. Contextualism

What is the relation between knowledge and context? According to contextualism, “the truth-conditions of knowledge-ascribing and knowledge-denying sentences . . . fluctuate in certain ways according to the context in which they are uttered.”<sup>3</sup> So on this view, a particular sentence of the form “*S* knows that *p*” can be true when uttered or entertained in a nonskeptical context but false when uttered or entertained in a skeptical context, even if the values of *S* and *p* are kept constant across these contexts. What is crucial is that this variation in truth-conditions of knowledge sentences depends on the use of the verb “to know” in that knowledge sentence. Thus the main thesis of contextualism can be stated as follows:

- C:** Due to a characteristic of “knows,” whether “*S* knows that *p*” is true depends on features of the conversational context in which “*S* knows that *p*” is uttered.<sup>4</sup>

**C** is the denial of what has long been the standard approach to the relation between knowledge and features of the conversational context: invariantism.<sup>5</sup> According to this theory, features of the conversational context have

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Green, OH: Philosophy Documentation Center), 91–106; “Assertion,” 167–205; *The Case for Contextualism: Knowledge, Skepticism, and Context, Vol. 1* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

<sup>3</sup> DeRose, “Assertion,” 168.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. also DeRose, *Case for Contextualism*, ch. 1.

<sup>5</sup> For a formulation of invariantism, see Peter Unger, *Ignorance: A Case for Skepticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975). For versions of what is known as “subject sensitive invariantism,” see John Hawthorne, *Knowledge and Lotteries* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004); Jason Stanley, *Knowledge and Practical Interests* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005); and Jeremy Fantl and Matthew McGrath, *Knowledge in an Uncertain World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009). Jonathan

no influence whatsoever on whether a subject can be truthfully attributed knowledge. Now **C** raises many questions, two of the most pressing of which are *what shifts* with changes in the conversational context and *what brings about a shift* in conversational context.

Starting with the first question, DeRose has argued that what shifts with changes in the conversational context is the *strength of epistemic position* that is required for knowledge.<sup>6</sup> Here strength of epistemic position is defined in terms of the tracking condition for knowledge, where the strength of a subject S's epistemic position depends on how far out into logical space S can track the truth.<sup>7</sup> The farther out into logical space S can track the truth, the stronger her epistemic position will be. Now what shifts in accordance with the conversational context is how far out into logical space S *should be able to* track the truth in order for her to count as knowing that *p*. In contexts with low epistemic standards, for S's belief that *p* to count as knowledge, a fairly weak epistemic position would suffice: S only has to track the truth in those worlds closest to the actual world in which *p* is true (S would continue to believe *p* in worlds in which *p* is true). In contexts with high standards, however, for S's belief that *p* to count as knowledge, a strong epistemic position is necessary: S has to track the truth far out into logical space, including worlds in which *p* is *false*. Thus in high-standard contexts, one's strength of epistemic position with respect to *p* must be such that one's belief that *p* is *sensitive*, where a belief is sensitive just in case the following conditional holds:

**SC:** If *p* were not the case, S would not have believed that *p*.

As to the second question, DeRose captures the mechanism that brings about a shift in the strength of epistemic position required for S to know *p* in what we call the "Rule of Sensitivity":

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Schaffer's contrastivism is a version of invariantism, albeit one where contextual features do play a central role. See his "Contrastive Knowledge," in *Oxford Studies in Epistemology*, Vol. I, ed. Tamar Szabó Gendler and John Hawthorne (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 235–71; "What Shifts? Thresholds, Standards, or Alternatives?," in *Contextualism in Philosophy*, ed. Gerhard Preyer and Georg Peter (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 115–30; and "Knowledge in the Image of Assertion," *Philosophical Issues* 18 (2008): 1–19.

<sup>6</sup> DeRose, "Skeptical Problem."

<sup>7</sup> The *locus classicus* for the notion of tracking is Robert Nozick, *Philosophical Explanations* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981). Sherrilyn Roush, *Tracking Truth: Knowledge, Evidence, and Science* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), offers an updated treatment.

**RS:** When it is asserted that some subject *S* knows (or does not know) some proposition *P*, the standards for knowledge (the standards for how good an epistemic position one must be in to count as knowing) tend to be raised, if need be, to such a level as to require *S*'s belief in that particular *P* to be sensitive for it to count as knowledge.<sup>8</sup>

Attributing knowledge to a subject and denying a subject knowledge will thus tend to raise the standards for knowledge so as to require the belief in the target proposition to be sensitive to count as knowledge.<sup>9</sup> Given RS, any particular utterance of “*S* knows that *p*” will be true if and only if (i) *S* believes that *p*, (ii) *p*, and (iii) *S*'s epistemic position is such that *S*'s belief that *p* is sensitive.

Of course, many details are left unspecified in this characterization of contextualism. But for assembling our argument for the unassertability of contextualism in the context of philosophy (§4), this is all we need.

### 3. The Knowledge Account of Assertion

What is the relation between assertion and knowledge? According to the knowledge account of assertion, knowledge plays a normative role in governing what one may assert.<sup>10</sup> Specifically, the knowledge account of assertion poses the following norm:

**KAA:** One ought to assert that *p* only if one knows that *p*.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> DeRose, “Skeptical Problem,” 36; *Case for Contextualism*, 14.

<sup>9</sup> It remains moot what will tend to *lower* the standards again. Duncan Pritchard, “Contextualism, Scepticism, and the Problem of Epistemic Descent,” *Dialectica* 55, no. 4 (2002): 327–49, contains a useful discussion of this issue.

<sup>10</sup> The knowledge account of assertion is defended in, for example, Unger, *Ignorance*; Timothy Williamson, *Knowledge and Its Limits* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); DeRose, “Assertion”; Hawthorne, *Knowledge*; John Turri, “Prompting Challenges,” *Analysis* 70, no. 3 (2010): 456–62; Matthew Benton, “Two More for the Knowledge Account of Assertion,” *Analysis* 71, no. 4 (2011): 684–87; Martijn Blaauw, “Reinforcing the Knowledge Account of Assertion,” *Analysis* 72, no. 1 (2012): 105–8; Martijn Blaauw and Jeroen de Ridder, “Unsafe Assertions,” *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 90, no. 4 (2012): 797–801.

<sup>11</sup> KAA is also accepted by Schaffer, “Knowledge in the Image,” where it is used in an argument in favor of contrastivism. It is, however, by no means without critics. See, for instance, Matthew Weiner, “Must We Know What We Say?,” *Philosophical Review* 114, no. 2 (2005): 227–51; Igor Douven, “Assertion, Knowledge, and Rational Credibility,” *Philosophical Review* 115, no. 4 (2006): 449–85; Jennifer Lackey, “Norms

As with most norms, there is a distinction to be made between primary and secondary propriety. Acknowledging this distinction, DeRose writes, “As happens with other rules, a kind of secondary propriety/impropriety will arise with respect to [the knowledge account of assertion]. While those who assert appropriately (with respect to this rule) in a primary sense will be those who actually obey it, a speaker who broke this rule in a blameless fashion (one who asserted something she didn’t know, but reasonably thought she did know) would in some secondary sense be asserting properly.”<sup>12</sup> According to DeRose, then, even if you did not comply with KAA because what you asserted was not known by you, you could still have complied with KAA in a weaker sense if you reasonably believed that you knew the proposition you asserted. Subjects who assert falsehoods that they reasonably believe to be true can behave appropriately in one sense and inappropriately in another.

DeRose accepts KAA but also argues that what epistemic position we must be in so that we can be warranted in asserting that  $p$  is a contextual matter. In some contexts, one must be in a very good epistemic position to be warranted in asserting that  $p$ , whereas in other contexts, a lesser epistemic standing suffices. So even though the norm for assertion is knowledge, there is a contextual variation in when a subject  $S$  is warranted in asserting something. This leads DeRose to accept the following thesis:

**CV:** What epistemic position one must be in so that one can be warranted in asserting that  $p$  is a *context-variable* matter.

DeRose now continues to argue that CV and KAA imply C. If the norm for warranted assertion is knowledge and if our ordinary practices display a flexibility with respect to what epistemic position one ought to be in so that one can warrantably assert a proposition, then there must be a flexibility in what knowledge is as well. Here is DeRose himself on this point: “The knowledge account of assertion provides a powerful argument for contextualism: If the standards for when one is in a position to warrantably assert that  $P$  are the same as those that comprise a truth-condition for ‘I know that  $P$ ’ then if the former vary with context, so do the latter. In short: The knowledge account of assertion together with the context-sensitivity of assertability yields contextualism about knowledge.”<sup>13</sup> And so KAA combined with

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of Assertion,” *Notas* 41, no. 4 (2007): 594–626; Sanford C. Goldberg, *Assertion: On the Philosophical Significance of Assertoric Speech* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015).

<sup>12</sup> DeRose, “Assertion,” 180.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 187.

CV—that is, the recognition that there is a contextual variation in when it is appropriate to assert something—support contextualism about knowledge.<sup>14</sup>

A complication here is that, given CV, DeRose cannot accept KAA as it stands. For DeRose, “knows” has many different senses and does not denote one property in all contexts. What it takes for “S knows that *p*” to be true depends on the conversational context of the attributor of knowledge. Accordingly, DeRose must hold that KAA actually expresses different norms in different contexts. Here is how DeRose contextualizes the knowledge rule: “To be positioned to assert that *p*, one must know that *p* according to the standards for knowledge that are in place as one makes one’s assertion.”<sup>15</sup> And so we arrive at the knowledge account of assertion contextualized in DeRose’s own formulation (2009, 99):

**KAAC:** A speaker, *S*, is well-enough positioned with respect to *p* to be able to properly assert that *p* if and only if *S* knows that *p* according to the standards for knowledge that are in place as *S* makes her assertion.<sup>16</sup>

This, in a nutshell, is DeRose’s argument for contextualism. How could anyone rest a “madly swaying distinction [i.e., the conditions for warranted assertability, MB & JdR] upon a stubbornly fixed foundation [i.e., the truth-conditions for ‘S knows that *p*,’ which invariantism holds to be fixed, MB & JdR]?”<sup>17</sup>

Again, many details are left unspecified in this characterization of KAA. But for assembling the argument for the unassertability of contextualism in the context of philosophy, this is all we need. It is to this argument that we now turn.

#### 4. The Unassertability of Contextualism

The argument for the unassertability of contextualism in the context of philosophy runs as follows:

<sup>14</sup> Adam Leite, “How to Link Assertion and Knowledge without Going Contextualist: A Reply to DeRose’s ‘Assertion, Knowledge, and Context,’” *Philosophical Studies* 134, no. 2 (2007): 111–29, contains a useful discussion of DeRose’s argument from KAA to contextualism.

<sup>15</sup> DeRose, “Assertion,” 182.

<sup>16</sup> DeRose, *Case for Contextualism*, 99. See Schaffer, “Knowledge in the Image,” for a similar rule geared to fit his contrastivist treatment of the norm of assertion.

<sup>17</sup> DeRose, *Case for Contextualism*, 101.

- (1) Contextualism (C)
- (2) Knowledge account of assertion contextualized (KAAC)
- (3) A subject S should assert contextualism in the context of philosophy only if “I know that contextualism is true” is true for S in that context. [from 2]
- (4) In the context of philosophy, the standards for knowledge require S’s belief that contextualism is true to be sensitive for it to count as knowledge.
- (5) S’s belief that contextualism is true is not sensitive.
- (6) In the context of philosophy, “I know that contextualism is true” is false for S. [from 4 and 5, *modus tollens*]
- (7) Hence S ought not to assert contextualism in the context of philosophy. [from 3 and 6]

The argument is valid. (1) and (2) are just the assumptions that contextualism and the knowledge account of assertion contextualized are true, and (3) is the application of KAAC to our particular assertion. Hence DeRose should find (1) through (3) uncontroversial. Only (4) and (5) stand in need of further support.

Starting with premise (4), it maintains that the standards for knowledge in a philosophical discussion are at least as demanding as when the word “know” is uttered, thus requiring belief in a philosophical position to be sensitive for it to count as knowledge. But why would that be? We offer two motivations.

First, it is predicted by the nature of philosophical inquiry. Philosophy is an activity that is characterized by (among other things) *precision*, *rigorous argumentation*, and *the continuous search for new error-possibilities, including remote ones*. Like other academic disciplines, it is a systematic search for knowledge with the highest attainable degree of justification by means of the best methods available to us. The level of scrutiny is immensely high in the context of philosophy. Not so high that it is required that the philosopher eliminate all skeptical scenarios in order to know her philosophical position—indeed, this isn’t a requirement for scientific knowledge in general. But high enough that it is required for knowledge that the philosopher be able to eliminate error-possibilities for her philosophical position and thus track the truth in a broad range of possible worlds, including some in which her philosophical position is false. What’s more, in *epistemology* in particular, the nature of *knowledge* is investigated. So arguably the word “knowledge” lingers over any epistemological debate. That brings to mind RS, albeit implicitly.

Second, contextualists have argued that the truth conditions of knowledge attributions are affected not only by RS but also by the stakes (the costs of being wrong). In the well-known Bank Cases, for instance, the subject is



correctly attributed knowledge in the first Bank Case but is correctly denied knowledge (of the very same proposition) in the second Bank Case only because the stakes have changed from low to high.<sup>18</sup> We maintain that the stakes are indeed high in the context of philosophy. Not in the sense that the costs of being wrong are bankruptcy, divorce, or suicide, but in the sense that the costs of being wrong are (partially) incorrect views about issues of fundamental importance: the fundamental nature of reality and ourselves. The reason we do philosophy is to understand ourselves and the world. Clearly this matters a lot to humans, or we wouldn't have stayed at it for millennia. So we conclude that the standards for knowledge in a philosophical discussion are high or at least that they are as high as in contexts where the word "know" is explicitly uttered.<sup>19</sup> In philosophy, our beliefs need to be sensitive to be instances of knowledge.

The question then is the following: Is S's belief that contextualism is true sensitive? In defense of premise (5), we offer two motivations. First, philosophy is extremely difficult. Many questions and issues that philosophy deals with are close to the limits of what our cognitive capacities have a grip on. The history of philosophy shows this. Most substantive positive philosophical theses have both historical and contemporary proponents and opponents of formidable intelligence, who offer powerful arguments for and against those theses. A very natural explanation for this is that we aren't very receptive to philosophical facts. They are elusive. Nothing guarantees that our philosophical beliefs generally track the truth to any significant degree, like, for instance, our perceptual beliefs. Because of this, the contextualist's belief is very unlikely to be sensitive.

Second, consider the notion of an *epistemic peer* that has become familiar from discussions about the epistemic significance of disagreement.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> The Bank Cases were introduced in DeRose, "Contextualism and Knowledge Attributions."

<sup>19</sup> Arguably, the fact that *philosophy* means "love of wisdom" already puts serious philosophical discussions under the spell of that most demanding of epistemic states.

<sup>20</sup> See, for instance, Thomas Kelly, "The Epistemic Significance of Disagreement," in *Oxford Studies in Epistemology*, Vol. I, ed. Tamar Szabó Gendler and John Hawthorne (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 167–96; David Christensen, "Epistemology of Disagreement: The Good News," *Philosophical Review* 116, no. 2 (2007): 187–217; Richard Feldman, "Reasonable Religious Disagreement," in *Philosophers without Gods*, ed. Louise Antony (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 194–214; Richard Feldman and Ted Warfield, eds., *Disagreement* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010); and David Christensen and Jennifer Lackey, eds., *The Epistemology of Disagreement: New Essays* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), for influential contributions to this debate.

The notion of an epistemic peer can be characterized by the following two principles:<sup>21</sup>

*Evidential equality:* A and B are evidential equals relative to the question whether  $p$  when A and B are equally familiar with the evidence and arguments that bear on the question whether  $p$ .

*Cognitive equality:* A and B are cognitive equals relative to the question whether  $p$  when A and B are equally competent, intelligent, and fair-minded in their abilities to assess the evidence and arguments that bear on the question whether  $p$ .

With respect to the contextualism/invariantism debate, some philosophers defend (forms of) contextualism, while others defend (forms of) invariantism. What is crucial to our defense of (5) is that the philosophers engaged in this debate—or at least some of them on either side—are epistemic peers and ought to recognize each other as such. They share the same evidence and they are cognitive equals.

Now if one evaluates sensitivity's counterfactual condition, one considers the nearest possible world in which  $p$  is false—the world in which  $p$  is false but that is otherwise as similar to the actual world as possible—and then tries to determine whether, in that world, S believes that  $p$ . If S does believe that  $p$  in that world, then her belief that  $p$  is insensitive. If S does not believe that  $p$  in that world, her belief is sensitive.

How does the contextualist's belief that contextualism is true fare with respect to this evaluation? Suppose, for the sake of argument, that this belief is indeed true in the actual world. Now consider the nearest possible world in which contextualism is false but that is otherwise as similar to the actual world as possible—call this world  $w$ . We will now have to try to determine whether the contextualist believes that contextualism is true in  $w$ .

Given the fact that some of the contextualist's epistemic peers do *not* believe that contextualism is true in the actual world in which contextualism is indeed true, it seems plausible that the contextualist wouldn't believe that contextualism is false in  $w$ . The situation is entirely symmetrical. So if invariantists are liable to make the mistake of believing their position to be true in a world in which it is false, then contextualists will be just as liable to make the same mistake with respect to their position. The reason for this is that the actual world and  $w$  will be highly similar from an evidential point of view. After all, a number of the contextualist's peers take the evidence in the actual world to support invariantism. They are aware of contextualism and the arguments in its support, but they have objections to them and

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<sup>21</sup> See Kelly, "Epistemic Significance," 174–75.

offer their own rival arguments in favor of invariantism. A world in which contextualism is true can thus look very similar to one in which invariantism is true, so the *nearest* world in which contextualism is false, *w*, will certainly look very similar to one in which it is true. Hence it is easy, even for highly trained and capable epistemologists, to mistake a world in which the evidence supports contextualism for one in which it supports invariantism. But then something analogous will be true for the nearest world in which contextualism is false—that is, world *w*. In that world, the contextualist is likely to make the mistake of taking the evidence to support contextualism when it in fact supports invariantism. The evidence for and against philosophical positions is extremely subtle. Why would the contextualist have special access to the philosophical facts and be responsive to these subtle differences in the available evidence in ways that her epistemic peers are not? We conclude that the contextualist's belief that contextualism is true is not a sensitive belief.<sup>22</sup>

With premises (4) and (5) thus supported, the argument looks solid.<sup>23</sup>

## 5. Replies Rejected

How might the contextualist reply? We initially anticipate the following three objections, the first of which is to say that even though it would be inappropriate in the primary sense to assert contextualism, it could still be appropriate in a secondary sense to do so. We would respond, first and foremost, that even if asserting contextualism could be appropriate in a secondary sense, this only *eases* the pain without taking it away. *Strictly speaking*, we are still not allowed to assert contextualism in philosophical contexts. But more important, we submit that asserting contextualism is inappropriate in *both* senses. It is inappropriate in the primary sense because the act of asserting contextualism while contextualism isn't known to be true violates the knowledge account of assertion; it is inappropriate in the secondary sense because it seems unlikely that DeRose can reasonably believe that he knows

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<sup>22</sup> See Sanford C. Goldberg, "Reliabilism in Philosophy," *Philosophical Studies* 142, no. 1 (2009): 105–17, for similar arguments to the effect that our belief-forming methods in philosophical matters are not reliable.

<sup>23</sup> After having written this essay, it came to our attention that Christoph Jäger, "Contextualism and the Knowledge Norm of Assertion," *Analysis* 72, no. 3 (2012): 491–98, presents a different argument for a similar conclusion, to wit that the position that combines contextualism and KAA (as DeRose's contextualism does) cannot coherently be stated. His argument, however, crucially relies on two principles that we do not assume: one is a contextualized principle about the factivity of knowledge, the other an epistemic closure principle. Hence his and our arguments are complementary.

that contextualism is true in light of the many problems that his epistemic peers have identified for contextualism.

The second reply the contextualist might give is an indifferent shrug: the problem we have mounted against contextualism is a problem for *any* philosophical view. Given KAA, no philosophical view can ever be asserted in the context of a philosophical discussion. What's so special about contextualism? We grant that contextualism isn't special in being the only philosophical position that is vulnerable to the objection we have introduced in this essay. But it is special in that it is allegedly *powerfully motivated by* KAA. If our objection is correct, contextualism is powerfully motivated by an account of assertion that at the same time forbids it from being asserted in that context in which it most naturally and relevantly should be asserted.

The third objection is to deny that our argument establishes any significant result because no philosopher ever wants to *assert* her philosophical position in the context of a philosophical discussion. Instead, philosophers merely hypothesize their favored positions to be true, hold them up for consideration, tentatively entertain them, provisionally accept them, or take some other noncommittal cognitive attitude toward them.<sup>24</sup>

We reply that this construal of philosophy is too deflationary. It is at odds with how philosophers conceive of what they are doing as expressed through their typical behavior in speech and writing. They write papers to argue for philosophical theses, and some of them even develop book-length arguments to defend their favored positions. They sometimes develop a strong commitment to a philosophical claim and get excited when they see a novel argument for that claim or irritated when they spot a problem for it. Some of them spend entire careers, or substantial parts of it, developing and defending a view. These are clear indications that philosophers do take committal cognitive attitudes toward those philosophical theses they take to be true and that their utterances of them are most naturally understood as assertions.<sup>25</sup> The characteristic phraseology one finds in philosophical papers and books provides further evidence. Philosophers *defend* positions, *establish* claims, *argue* that so-and-so is the best solution to a philosophical problem, give *compelling* arguments, offer *strong* reasons, and *conclude* that such-and-such is *correct*, the *best* explanation, a *superior* account, and so on. Indeed, consider what DeRose himself says about contextualism: it is "the correct solution

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<sup>24</sup> Goldberg, *Assertion*, thinks that these are indeed the typical attitudes philosophers take toward their views. Since he also maintains that philosophers do assert their views, he rejects KAA and proposes replacing it by a context-sensitive norm.

<sup>25</sup> Of course, this is not to deny that philosophers also frequently take various noncommittal cognitive attitudes to certain philosophical theses.

to the puzzle [the Argument from Ignorance] confronts us with”;<sup>26</sup> it “can finally solve this perennially thorny philosophical problem.”<sup>27</sup> Other candidate solutions to the skeptical puzzle result from “a failure to see the truth of contextualism”;<sup>28</sup> the contextualist solution is “the best resolution of our puzzling conflict of intuitions.”<sup>29</sup> To interpret all of these and similar locutions as something weaker than assertions of a philosophical thesis surely goes against the plain sense of words. So we conclude that the third reply is unconvincing as well. Philosophers, or at least some of them, do assert philosophical positions. If a position cannot coherently be asserted in the context of philosophy, that is a significant blow against it.<sup>30</sup>

## 6. One More Reply Rejected

A fourth and final objection is to deny premise (5) and argue that a contextualist’s belief in the truth of contextualism *is* sensitive, since contextualism—like many other philosophical theses—is, if true, *necessarily* true. Beliefs in necessary truths trivially satisfy SC because its antecedent is never actualized. If *p* is a necessary truth, then there are no possible worlds in which *p* is false. Hence the sensitivity condition (“If *p* were not the case, S would not have believed *p*”) is always satisfied. We have several lines of response to this objection.

The first and most important thing to note is that if belief in necessary truths is indeed trivially sensitive, then this is an embarrassment for SC: it means that knowledge of necessary truths comes too easy.<sup>31</sup> Hence there

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<sup>26</sup> DeRose, “Skeptical Problem,” 2.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 41.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 49.

<sup>30</sup> Logan Paul Gage called our attention to the fact that DeRose himself explores the issue of assertions in philosophical contexts in his new book *The Appearance of Ignorance: Knowledge, Skepticism, and Context, Volume 2* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), briefly in chapter 4 and more fully in appendix C. Although he doesn’t fully commit, he appears to favor a view on which (a) there isn’t much knowledge to be had in philosophy, (b) we nonetheless make assertions, but (c) operate under a “pretense of knowledge” when doing so. Sometimes, however, we need to “get real” and lift the pretense, for instance in response to challenges questioning whether a speaker really knows what she asserts. A fuller evaluation of this proposal must await another occasion, but for now it suffices to note that—pretense aside—our conclusion stands: asserting contextualism in philosophy violates the norm for assertion that is supposed to be an important motivation for the view.

<sup>31</sup> This problem led Nozick himself to abandon the sensitivity requirement for knowledge of necessary truths. See Ernest Sosa, “How to Defeat Opposition to

is initial reason to doubt that this objection has much force. Defending the assertability of contextualism in philosophical contexts by exploiting a problematic feature of the sensitivity condition doesn't seem like an attractive dialectical strategy.<sup>32</sup> But suppose, for the sake of argument, that some suitable modification of sensitivity can be devised on which belief in necessary truths comes out as sensitive but not trivially so.<sup>33</sup> Is it indeed plausible to think of contextualism as a necessary truth?

To the extent that contextualism is a *linguistic thesis* about the word "know" and its cognates, its truth cannot be necessary. Facts about how words are used in a language are highly contingent due to the conventional nature of language. Just as the word "know" could have meant something entirely different, it also seems possible that the truth conditions for knowledge-attributing sentences would not have shifted with context.

Alternatively, contextualism can be construed as a thesis about the *concept* of knowledge. This is what DeRose himself alludes to when he emphasizes that contextualism is not just a piece of philosophy of language but has profound importance for epistemology<sup>34</sup> and explicates contextualism as claiming that "knowledge" has many different senses.<sup>35</sup> On such a construal, the contextualist could maintain with some plausibility that contextualism expresses a conceptual and hence necessary truth about the concept of knowledge.

We don't believe, however, that this suggestion has much going for it. First, as we have noted before, the current epistemological scene features knowledgeable and intelligent philosophers who deny that contextualism is true. They defend invariantism of various sorts. This state of affairs is a strong indication that, given what we know about the world and about knowledge attributions specifically, contextualism is not the only possibility. It looks as if invariantism represents a possible way knowledge attributions could have worked. Given that this is the way things look and absent independent reasons to deny it, we have good reason to suppose that there are possible worlds in which the concept of knowledge behaves as invariantists say.

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Moore," *Philosophical Perspectives* 13 (1999): 141–53, 146.

<sup>32</sup> DeRose is aware of this problem for Sensitivity and appeals to the notion of "strength of epistemic position" to handle knowledge of necessary truths. See his "Sosa, Safety, Sensitivity, and Skeptical Hypotheses," in *Sosa and His Critics*, ed. John Greco (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), 22–41. We return to this in the next section.

<sup>33</sup> Cf. Roush, *Tracking Truth*, 134–47, for a sophisticated attempt.

<sup>34</sup> DeRose, "Contextualism: Explanation and Defense," 188–89.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 191–92.

Second, whether the truth conditions for knowledge attributions shift with conversational contexts would seem to depend on what the world is like naturally and socially. There is a relationship between the way the world is and the way the concept of knowledge and the word “knowledge” function. Therefore, the truth of contextualism cannot be necessary. In possible worlds with relevantly different physical or social characteristics, contextualism could be false and invariantism true.<sup>36</sup> To see this, consider the following examples of possible worlds in which contextualism appears to be false.<sup>37</sup>

Consider a possible world in which we have vastly superior cognitive abilities—we’re as close to being omniscient as is possible for beings who are spatiotemporally limited. As a result, we know the things we know with high degrees of confidence and tend to have maximal justification for what we know. We hardly make mistakes and believe virtually no falsehoods. In such epistemically optimal conditions, it seems implausible that the truth conditions for knowledge ascriptions would shift with conversational context. After all, no matter what the conversational context, we always satisfy demanding epistemic standards. There is no reason why the truth conditions for knowledge sentences would be sensitive to context.

As a second example, imagine a possible world physically very similar to ours but with different sociolinguistic conventions. There may be worlds in which people are extremely risk-averse in epistemic matters. They only ascribe knowledge when people have indubitable beliefs of the kind Descartes thought was required for knowledge. In these worlds, even in low-standards contexts where one is in a relatively strong epistemic position with regard to a proposition, linguistic conventions dictate that one not ascribe knowledge to oneself. There may also be worlds where the conventions vis-à-vis “know” license what seem to us extremely liberal and unwarranted knowledge ascriptions. Minimally justified beliefs all get to be called knowledge, no matter what the conversational context. People in these worlds have no problem at all saying that we can know the denials of skeptical hypotheses, even in a philosophical discussion. Being raised on their lax linguistic conventions, they don’t share our intuitions with regard to the appropriateness of the use

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<sup>36</sup> See Stephen Hetherington, “Is This a World Where Knowledge Has to Include Justification?,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 75, no. 1 (2007): 41–69, for an analogous argument to the effect that knowledge doesn’t necessarily include justification.

<sup>37</sup> Note, however, that nothing in particular hangs on the details of these examples; they only serve to make plausible the general claim that the truth of contextualism (or other claims about knowledge attributions) depends on the contingencies of the natural and social world.



of “know.” In such worlds, contextualism would be false. Since such worlds seem to be genuinely possible, contextualism isn’t necessarily true.<sup>38</sup>

As a final resort, the contextualist might propose that contextualism is not a necessary truth of the conceptual variety but an *a posteriori* necessary truth of the sort Kripke familiarized us with. She might propose that “knowledge” is a rigid designator for the concept of knowledge that figures in contextualism. Just as it is necessary that water is  $H_2O$ , it is necessary that knowledge is what contextualism says it is, or so this proposal maintains. Although there may be possible worlds in which people use “knowledge” to refer to an invariant relation, these worlds aren’t worlds in which contextualism is false. Rather, they are worlds in which something other than the contextualist’s notion of knowledge occupies the role played by knowledge in our world (just as XYZ occupies the role of watery stuff in possible worlds in which watery stuff is not  $H_2O$ ). We could call this knowledge-y stuff *schmowledge*. According to this proposal, then, the reason that contextualism is necessarily true is that in possible worlds where schmowledge occupies the knowledge-role and is the referent of “knowledge,” *knowledge* is still what the contextualist says it is in the actual world, even though schmowledge is not. Hence there are no possible worlds in which knowledge and knowledge attributions do not behave as contextualism has it.

In response to this proposal, we reply, first, that, to the best of our knowledge, contextualists have neither claimed nor defended that “knowledge” is a rigid designator. So it would at least be a surprising result that contextualism requires this to be so. Moreover, the view that knowledge is a natural kind is not a popular view.<sup>39</sup> Because rigid designators typically latch onto natural kinds, this speaks against “knowledge” being a rigid designator. Furthermore, the core idea of contextualism—that “know” has many different senses—is at odds with “knowledge” being a rigid designator. A rigid designator serves to pick out one and the same thing in all possible worlds in which that thing exists. That is something a word with many different senses cannot do. Suppose “water” has many different senses that shift with context. In one context it means  $H_2O$ ; in another it might mean hydrogen peroxide,  $H_2O_2$ ; and in yet another heavy water,  $D_2O$ . Such facts would seem

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<sup>38</sup> It is no objection to point out that in the worlds described, the contextualist would not believe contextualism. The point of these examples was not to establish that there are nearby worlds in which contextualism is false but still believed to be true by contextualists (for this, see section 3), but to show that the truth of contextualism is not necessary.

<sup>39</sup> A notable dissenter is Hilary Kornblith, *Knowledge and Its Place in Nature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).



to preclude “water” from being a rigid designator, precisely because it no longer picks out one and the same thing across possible worlds.<sup>40</sup>

Fortunately, however, it doesn’t matter where we come down on this issue because even if “knowledge” were a rigid designator and the truth of contextualism *a posteriori* necessary, a version of our argument still goes through. To see this, we must consider how contextualism could be a necessary *a posteriori* truth.<sup>41</sup> If “knowledge” were a rigid designator, a sentence describing the central contextualist claim, such as “The truth conditions for knowledge attributions are context-sensitive,” would express a necessary truth because “knowledge” picks out our actual notion of knowledge in every possible world in which this notion exists. But now note that this is just one of two possible ways to think about how the term “*knowledge*” applies to the world. The first, and presumably most natural, way to think about it is to take our world to be the actual world. If we do so, and we assume for the sake of argument that contextualism is true in our world, the result is what we just described: “knowledge” applies to the contextualist notion of knowledge that occupies the role of knowledge in our world because this contextualist notion is “the knowledge-y stuff of our acquaintance.” Another way to think about it, however, is to consider what the word “*knowledge*” would apply to *under the hypothesis that another world than our world is actual*. Had a world where schmowledge occupies the knowledge-role been actual, the term “*knowledge*” would have applied to the invariantist schmowledge because in such a world, schmowledge would have been the knowledge-y stuff of our acquaintance, which we would have baptized “knowledge.”

This shows that there is an important sense in which the truth of contextualism is not necessary, even if “knowledge” is supposed to be a rigid designator. If we go by the second way of thinking about the intension of “knowledge,” the truth of contextualism is contingent. If another possible world than our world had been actual, “knowledge” could easily have applied to an invariantist notion of knowledge. Hence on this understanding, the sentence “The truth conditions for knowledge attributions are context-sensitive” may well have been false and is therefore not a necessary truth.

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<sup>40</sup> Alvin Goldman, “Philosophical Intuitions: Their Target, Their Source, and Their Epistemic Status,” *Grazer Philosophische Studien* 74, no. 1 (2007): 1–26, 17, expresses a similar worry.

<sup>41</sup> What follows is inspired by the two-dimensional modal logic treatment of necessary *a posteriori* truths found in David Chalmers, *The Conscious Mind: In Search of a Fundamental Theory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 56–65; and Frank Jackson, *From Metaphysics to Ethics: A Defence of Conceptual Analysis* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), ch. 3.

The upshot of the previous discussion is that the truth of contextualism is not a necessary truth. Hence the fourth objection fails too. Contextualism cannot plausibly be construed as a conceptual truth, nor is it plausible to think of it as an *a posteriori* necessary truth in the Kripkean sense. And even if its truth were *a posteriori* necessary, it would still be contingent in another important sense.

### 7. A Modified Argument: Sensitivity vs. Strength of Epistemic Position

In replying to the fourth objection, we started out by noting that necessary truths are a problem for SC because belief in a necessary truth trivially satisfies it. The contextualist would do well, therefore, not to insist on SC for the case of necessary truths. In this final section, we consider what happens if the contextualist adopts a different criterion for appropriate knowledge ascriptions in high-standards contexts. Since our argument in its present formulation hinges on the contextualist's belief being insensitive, this is a pressing matter.

In fact, DeRose himself proposes a further criterion, next to sensitivity. In a paper in which he compares and contrasts his sensitivity condition with Ernest Sosa's safety condition, he emphasizes that, for him, it is ultimately *strength of epistemic position*—and not sensitivity—that matters for knowledge, although a failure to satisfy Sensitivity does often provide a correct explanation of why people lack knowledge.<sup>42</sup> Strength of epistemic position is to be understood in terms of one's beliefs matching the facts of the matter or tracking the truth in the relevant sphere of (nearby) possible worlds.<sup>43</sup> This is importantly different from sensitivity. Whereas sensitivity only concerns one's belief about *p in possible worlds where p is false*, strength also takes into account one's belief *in worlds in which p is true*. Unlike the sensitivity of one's belief in a certain truth, then, the strength of one's epistemic position with regard to a proposition can be upset by the presence of nearby possible worlds in which that proposition is true but one fails to believe it.

What this means is that our whole argument can also be put in terms of strength of epistemic position instead of sensitivity. As follows:

- (1) Contextualism (C)
- (2) Knowledge Account of Assertion Contextualized (KAAC)

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<sup>42</sup> DeRose, "Sosa, Safety."

<sup>43</sup> DeRose, "Skeptical Problem," 34; "Sosa, Safety," 33–35.

- (3) A subject S should assert contextualism in the context of a philosophical discussion only if “I know that contextualism is true” is true for S in that context. [from 2]
- (4') In the context of a philosophical discussion, in order for S's belief that contextualism is true to count as knowledge, S needs a strong epistemic position.
- (5') S isn't in a strong epistemic position *vis-à-vis* the belief that contextualism is true.
- (6) In the context of a philosophical discussion, “I know that contextualism is true” is false for S. [from 4 and 5, *modus tollens*]
- (7) Hence S ought not to assert contextualism in the context of a philosophical discussion. [from 3 and 6]

The defense of (4') and (5') would mostly run along the same lines as that of (4) and (5) because insensitivity and strength are closely connected. Insensitivity of someone's belief detracts from the strength of that person's epistemic position. So by showing someone's belief to be insensitive, one also shows her epistemic position to be compromised.

In defense of (5'), however, an additional consideration can be added. If  $p$  is true in the actual world, then the strength of S's epistemic position with regard to  $p$  is upset by the presence of nearby worlds in which  $p$  is still true but S fails to believe that  $p$ . This is particularly pertinent to the present discussion. If we assume, again, that contextualism is true in the actual world, it seems that the contextualist could have easily failed to believe that contextualism is true in a nearby world in which it is true. Given that there are well-informed and competent epistemologists who believe that invariantism is true (and hence that contextualism is false) in the actual world, it is extremely plausible that someone who believes that contextualism is true in the actual world could believe that invariantism is true in a nearby world in which, say, she received a somewhat different training in philosophy or had followed a different research trajectory. After all, these worlds would be extremely similar as far as the relevant evidence is concerned, perhaps even indistinguishable. It follows that the contextualist's epistemic position with regard to contextualism isn't very strong—not strong enough to count as knowing in the context of a philosophical discussion.

Putting the argument in terms of strength of epistemic position also evades the fourth objection, which turned on the idea that the truth of contextualism is necessary and that belief in it is therefore automatically sensitive. Since SC only looks at worlds in which a proposition is false, necessary truths come out as trivially sensitive because the antecedent of the criterion (if  $p$  were not the case) is never actualized. No such shortcut is available for strength of epistemic position, since nothing whatsoever guarantees

that one will automatically be in a very strong position with regard to necessary truths. If one fails to believe a necessary truth in nearby worlds, one's epistemic position with regard to that truth will be weak. So even if our reply to the fourth objection would turn out to be unsuccessful, our revised argument in terms of strength of epistemic position still goes through. Even if contextualism is a necessary truth after all and the contextualist is prepared to bite the bullet on the trivial sensitivity of belief in necessary truths, she still wouldn't be off the hook. Her epistemic position vis-à-vis contextualism is too weak to count as knowing in the context of a philosophical discussion and, therefore, in asserting contextualism she would violate KAAC.

If it has these advantages, one might wonder why we didn't formulate our argument in terms of strength of epistemic position in the first place. The reason is that, in our opinion, using that notion would have introduced unnecessary vagueness into the discussion because it invites questions about the *exact strength* that is required throughout various contexts, the *size* of the relevant sphere of possible worlds, and the *right ordering* of worlds in that sphere. In contrast, focusing on sensitivity provided a clear-cut criterion and effectively sidestepped these difficult questions. In addition, of course, DeRose himself insists that in most cases, the insensitivity of a belief provides the correct explanation of why that belief fails to constitute knowledge. Hence showing that the contextualist's belief that contextualism is true is insensitive is a good argument for the conclusion that "I know that contextualism is true" is false for the contextualist in a philosophical discussion, *even if* it is admitted that ultimately, strength of epistemic position is the crucial notion.

## 8. Envoi

Bringing the preceding points together, what moral emerges from the discussion in this essay? Not that contextualism is false. Not that the knowledge account of assertion is false. Not even that contextualism cannot be based on the knowledge account of assertion. What emerges is that if contextualists base their theory on the knowledge account of assertion, they can no longer coherently assert their own theory in the most natural and appropriate context: that of philosophy.<sup>44</sup>

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